Factors stifling the growth of tourism in Africa

By Olukayode Kolawole   7 Nov 2016

I was privileged to attend the 12th edition of the African Travel & Tourism Conference (Akwaaba): a gathering of travel and tourism experts in Africa - both from private establishments and various government parastatals.

The event was held at the Eko Hotel & Suites, Lagos from 31 October to 1 November 2016. My attendance was indeed a worthwhile investment as it exposed me to a cocktail of different issues stalling the growth of the industry as well as practical recommendations that are believed to be the fertilizer African tourism needs to germinate. For me, the icing on the cake was the convergence of key stakeholders from across the continent, and lots of representatives from almost all the African countries talking to people on the many opportunities for tourists in their countries.

I saw sheer enthusiasm on the faces of these representatives as they went about selling their countries as the best tourist destination. This wasn't an all-comers event. Even I only had the opportunity to attend because the managing director of Jumia Travel, Kushal Dutta was invited as a panelist to discuss 'The Internet and the Future of Travel in Africa.'

While all the speakers and panelists touched on many pertinent issues on how to advance the course of tourism in Africa, I found very intriguing a presentation by the Deputy Minister of Tourism for Zimbabwe, Anastacia Ndlovu. She provided some insights on the growth and opportunities that tourism can facilitate on the continent. These opportunities are undoubtedly very promising, if properly harnessed, and are the impetuses urgently required to compliment trade and commerce for a better economic development of each country.

It was effortlessly transparent from the data she presented that the advancement of travel and tourism for a country like Nigeria might seem improbable if the government doesn't embrace its potentials and invests enormously to reap untold economic rewards.

There were six major challenges which the deputy minister stated as the reasons for lack of growth in the sector, although she mentioned that Zimbabwe isn't exempted from the burden of these challenges.

Underdeveloped tourism infrastructure

Countries like Switzerland, Germany, and Austria lead the world in terms of their travel and tourism industry competitiveness. They are closely followed by Spain, United Kingdom, USA, France, Canada, Sweden, and Singapore. There are thousands of hotel rooms per capita in these countries by international standard. The policy environments are also top-ranking considering the low cost required to start a business, and a much flexible visa policy. For Africa's infrastructure to develop, we need to protect our natural and cultural resources, fix our air transport system (90% of tourists travel by air), improve the quality of roads and ports, and fix electricity issues as it applies to each country.

Poor intra-African air connectivity

There are very few flights connecting major cities in Africa; and not many of the very few are good enough, or at least meet international standards. The perception of Africa being a country and not a continent has to change. We need to overhaul the entire air transport system within Africa, and engender more airlines to fly within Africa. The number of tourists visiting Africa every year runs into millions. Imagine how many more we will record if we can bring in more airlines to convey many more tourists to various destinations.

Absence of strategically-integrated product development and marketing

We need to develop tourism products that are marketable. This is indeed lacking in Africa. For instance, Uganda has been able to grow its tourism sector on one thing that a lot of tourists love to see: gorillas. The country has the largest mountain gorilla population in the world – 54% (over 400 of them). In addition, there are over 5,000 chimpanzees found in Uganda. The country is also home to the world's largest number of monkeys, baboons, apes, rare colobus, nocturnal bush babies and pottos found in pristine eco-environment.

Commendably, Uganda has packaged its tourism around gorilla sight-seeing, and a lot of tourists visit every year just to see these apes. Such tourism products/packages is what many countries in Africa need to market to the world.

Religious tourism is another untapped market. There are tons of people flying into Nigeria to attend churches such as The Synagogue, Christ Embassy and many more. These people do not come into the country only for a religious programme, they interact with people, discover new places, and go sight-seeing. During these religious programmes, a lot of hotels cash in what they would make in six months in just one week, transporters increase their earnings too, and so do airlines.

Visa restrictions

The effort of the African Union (AU) in developing a [Pan-African passport](#) which allows all Africans to travel freely within Africa without a visa is highly commendable. Of course, the objective is to achieve what the European Union passport has made possible. However, more needs to be done.

If we can cut out visa requirements as we have in some countries, it will engender the growth of tourism as more people will be entitled to free movement within the continent. Although, there are worries that the security threats this poses outweighs the benefits that we as a continent will accrue from lifting all visa restrictions. It therefore becomes the responsibility of each country's government to ensure there's adequate supply of security, and if possible putting in place strict measures to gatekeep criminals from perpetrating their evil acts.

Poor treasury support

In most African countries, it is sad that the tourism sector gets the lowest budget even in countries where tourism is their mainstay. This poses a huge threat to the survival and eventual sustainability of the sector. Government at all levels should invest adequate funds to boost its economic viability which has the potential to contribute up to 25% to each country's GDP.

Brand Africa

Our image as a continent has been marred with poverty, strife, hunger, war, starvation, diseases, and the list continues. These things shape the way people see us and our countries. We need an urgent clinical repair of these bad representations. We have challenges as a country, no doubt – as do developed countries – but we are not our challenges. For instance, a lot of tourists stayed away from visiting Nigeria in the last three years in fear of the terrorist group Boko Haram. But what country doesn't suffer from terrorism, whether on a large or small scale? So why should this challenge determine who we are?

It has become our collective responsibility to treat people who come to our country like they are part of us. Remember, we need word of mouth marketing to promote our tourist destinations more than we need advertising. A tourist who was well treated and accommodated will go back to friends and family to recommend your country as a good destination to visit.

To the continent of Africa! To the great people of Africa! From Africa to the world!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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